

LETTERS

TO THE

J E W S.

PART II.

OCCASIONED BY

MR. DAVID LEVI'S REPLY TO THE
FORMER LETTERS.

By JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, LL.D. F.R.S.

AC. IMP. PETROP. R. PARIS. HOLM. TAURIN. AUREL. MED. PARIS.
HARLEM. CANTAB. AMERIC. ET PHILAD. SOCIUS.

שׁוּבוּ אֵלֵי וְאַשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאות

Mal. iii. 7.

BIRMINHAM,

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J E W S.

P A R T II.

L E T T E R I.

Of Mr. Levi's Want of Candour, his Ignorance of profane Literature, and of the New Testament; and of his requiring Unanimity in the Opinions of Christians.

Breibren in the belief of the unity of God,

I Am happy to find that I have, in any measure, gained your attention to the Letters I took the liberty to address to you, inviting you to an amicable discussion of the evidences of christianity, and that one of your body, Mr. David Levi, has favoured me with an answer to them. I should have

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been

been more happy if he had been better acquainted with profane literature, as it is commonly, though improperly called, and if he had shewn a little more candour.

According to him, p. 9, I am “not intitled to the appellation of a christian,” and p. 30, “notwithstanding all my boasted sincerity, the honour of God, or the propagation of christianity, are things of little moment in my serious thoughts.” He perceives in me, p. 31, “a complete deist,” “under a most jesuitical argument.”

I feel not for myself, but for *you*, when I recite these things. You must be ashamed that one of your body should have begun this important discussion in a manner so unworthy of you. To make any reply to such calumny would answer no purpose. If it be well founded, it must be so utterly unprincipled, that my most solemn declarations would stand for nothing. That I am not the person Mr. Levi describes, I can only appeal to the tenor of my conduct, and to my writings, with both which he is probably unacquainted.

I com-

I complain of my opponent's want of profane literature, because it leaves us destitute of some common principles, without which it is impossible to come to any conclusion with respect to the question in debate. He maintains, p. 65, that it is contrary to the scriptures to assert that there were more than four kings of Persia; whereas, if there be any faith in history, there were more than twice that number. Nor is this at all contrary to the scriptures. For it is only said, Dan. xi. 2. *Behold there shall stand up yet three kings in Persia, and the fourth shall be far richer than they all; and by his strength, through his riches, he shall stir up all against the realm of Grecia.* By this nothing more is to be understood, than that only three kings of Persia would intervene between the time of Daniel, and that king who would make a formidable invasion of Greece.

Mr. Levi also asserts (Note, p. 61) that the work of Josippon Ben Gorion in Hebrew, was written by the same Josephus who wrote in Greek: whereas no two histo-

ries can be more contradictory to one another than they are, even with respect to the very circumstance for which he quotes the Hebrew work, viz. the history of king Agrippa, who according to *it* was put to death by Vespasian, at the siege of Jerusalem, but according to the Greek lived peaceably at Rome, after the Jewish war was over. The Hebrew Josephus makes this Agrippa to have been the messiah of Daniel (Gothæ edit. p. 828) whereas the writer of the Greek applied all the prophecies concerning your messiah to Vespasian.

Any person possessed of the two histories, as I am, may easily satisfy himself that the Greek is the genuine work, and the Hebrew copy the production of another person, and entitled to no credit whatever. For the evidence of this I must refer you to Mr. Basnage *.

* Mr. Levi says (p. 61, Note) that Mr. Basnage, "in his great zeal to decry this work has fallen into a most egregious blunder;" observing that he first says that it was the production of the *eleventh century*, and then that it was known to Saadias in the *tenth century*. But this is

a misre-

It is necessary also to the proper discussion of the evidences of christianity, that the Jews should be well acquainted with the New Testament, which Mr. Levi is not. He even says, p 22, he “ does not find it recorded that Jesus prophesied *in the name of God*,” and asserts, p. 23, that “ he preached *himself* as the light of the world ;” whereas nothing can be more evident than that Jesus uniformly asserted his mission from God, and appealed to the miracles which God enabled him to perform ; disclaiming all wisdom and power of his own, 1 John v. 19. *Verily, verily, I*

a misrepresentation of Mr. Basnage, who, after giving his opinion concerning the real age of this work, viz. that it was the production of the eleventh century, says it did not make its appearance before the *twelfth*, and that the most that can be said is, that it may *seem* to be referred to by two writers in the *tenth* century, but that “ those two testimonies are very obscure and doubtful.” Liv. 9. chap. 6. vol. 13. p. 159. of the last edition. Could a work of this kind have remained unknown, and unquoted by any writer, Jew or christian, a thousand years, when so much account has been made of it since ? It is absolutely incredible. Dr. Lardner supposes this work to have been written in the beginning of the tenth century. *Testimonies*, vol. 1. p. 213.

say unto you, the Son can do nothing of himself. ver. 30, *I can of my cwnself do nothing.* ver. 36, *The works which the Father has given me to finish, the same works that I do bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me; and the Father himself, who hath sent me, hath borne witness of me.* ver. 43, *I come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not.* This, and more to the same purpose, is all contained in one single chapter. He likewise says (John xiv. 10) *The words that I speak unto you, I speak not of myself, but the Father that dwelleth in me be doth the works.* Such is the uniform language of Jesus, who, Mr. Levi says, did not speak in the name of God.

Mr. Levi says, p. 72, that “ the professors of christianity ought to be unanimous before they attempt to convert the Jews,” and particularly that we ought first to be agreed among ourselves whether Jesus be God. Besides what I have advanced on this subject in my former *Letters*, 2d edition, p. 42, I shall now observe, that it is as much your business to determine what the tenets of christianity are, as it is ours.

ours. You see a person pretending to come to you from the God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to do such things as no man could do but by the immediate power of God. Is it not then your business to inquire whether he really comes from God, or not? If your ancestors had given no attention to a claim of this kind, they would have rejected even Moses.

Do you, then, consider what Jesus *taught*, and what he *did*, and judge for yourselves, whether what he delivered was worthy of God, and whether the miracles were performed by *the finger of God*, or not. If we who profess Christianity should all agree what its tenets are, it would not, it ought not to satisfy you. We might make too favourable a report concerning it, and such as you would not abide by. Why then do you wait for our agreement, when, if we did agree, that circumstance would not weigh with you at all?

LETTER II.

Of the miraculous Conception of Jesus, and of Contradictions in the Gospel History.

M R. Levi says, p. 9, I cannot be a christian, because I do not believe the miraculous conception of Jesus. But I imagine it is sufficient to denominate a person a christian, that he believes the divine mission of Jesus, whether he believe any thing else concerning him, or not.

He says that, in order to disbelieve this, I must suppose some parts of our present gospels to be spurious; and then, he says, p. 82, "how are we sure that the remainder "is authentic?" I cannot here repeat all that I have written on this subject in the fourth volume of my *History of Early Opinions concerning Christ*, but must content myself with referring you to that work. I shall only observe on this occasion, that I consider the evangelists as mere *historians* (indeed,

(indeed, they do not pretend to any thing more) faithful relaters of what they believed to be true. But no histories are received on the mere faith of the writers, but properly on the testimony of the age in which they wrote, which would not have received their accounts, and have handed them down to posterity as *true*, if they had not been known to be so, at least in the main.

Now the great and leading facts in the gospel history, the account of the doctrines, the miracles, the death, and resurrection of Christ, are so handed down to us. They were believed by christians in all ages, and from the earliest times. But this is not the case with the account of the miraculous conception. The christians of your nation (I believe the great body of them, though with some exceptions) never did believe it; and a very learned and highly respected person among the Jewish christians, I mean Symmachus, who translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, wrote a treatise, in a very early period, to refute the story. It was
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also disbelieved by all the early Gnostics, with whose opinions it would have accorded remarkably well.

The miraculous conception, therefore, cannot be said to have the testimony of the age in which it was promulgated ; and as the Jews, being natives of the country, had the best opportunity of informing themselves concerning it, their testimony, which is against it, is entitled to the greatest credit.

The *gospel* used by your countrymen was that of Matthew, without the two first chapters, which contain the account of the miraculous conception. It may be presumed, therefore, that they saw sufficient reason for rejecting those chapters, as, in their opinion, not written by Matthew ; and if so extraordinary a story had been true, it cannot be imagined that either he, or Mark, or John, would have omitted it. As to the account of Luke, whether it was written by him or not, I have shewn that it abounds with the most manifest improbabilities.

As to the disbelief of the miraculous conception drawing after it the disbelief of the whole

whole gospel history, judge from fact, and not from imagination. Was this the case with the Ebionites? and, among them, of Symmachus? To say nothing of myself, can it be shewn to have been the case with any other person who has thought as I do with respect to this subject? The greater probability is, that persons finding themselves unable to believe this story, and not seeing how to separate the belief of it from that of the rest of the history, may be led to reject the whole. This, indeed, is, in some measure, your own case.

Mr. Levi's view in urging me with this story, is sufficiently conspicuous. If I should admit the truth of it, he would immediately say, as all your countrymen have done, that there was an end of the argument between us; because Jesus, not being descended in the usual course of generation from the male line of David, could not be your Messiah. On the other hand, if the story be rejected, he will reject the whole gospel history, of which, he says, it is a part.

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That the story of the miraculous conception should be started, and gain credit, in a very early period, I do not much wonder at, considering how willing the Christians were to think as highly as possible of their master, with the meanness of whose birth and parentage, as well as the circumstances of his death, they were continually reproached.

One of the contradictions that Mr. Levi observes in the gospel history, p. 81, is that, according to Matthew, Jesus was descended from Nathan, but according to Luke from Solomon. As I reject the introduction to the gospel of Matthew, as not written by him, I am not concerned with this contradiction. There is another, however, on which he lays much stress, p. 80; which is that according to Mark, Jesus cursed the fig-tree the day after his arrival at Jerusalem, whereas, according to Matthew, it was on the day of his arrival.

But would Mr. Levi, or any reasonable man, reject, as of no value, any other two histo-

historians, for so trifling a variation as this? If we do, we must reject all history, and even the books of Kings and Chronicles. For in them there are greater differences than this. On the contrary, the surest marks of authenticity in histories, the circumstances that intitle them to the fullest credit, are their agreement in things of great consequence, to which the writers could not but attend, and their differing in things of small consequence, to which they would naturally give less attention. This shews that they did not write in concert, but that they are proper *independent evidences* of the facts they relate. Had one of the evangelists said that Jesus drove the buyers and sellers out of the temple, and another of them asserted that he did no such thing, it would have been more to Mr. Levi's purpose. But even such a difference as this would not invalidate the whole of the gospel history.

LETTER

LETTER III.

Of the Miracles of Jesus as a Proof of his divine Mission, and of Mr. Levi's Objections to some of them.

WHAT surprises me most in Mr. Levi is his professing to pay so little regard to the *miracles* of Jesus. "Whether," he says, p. 22, "it was by the art of deception, or supernatural power, it is not my business to inquire." But, certainly, nothing can be of more importance than to inquire whether miracles are real or pretended. Because a change in the constitution of nature can only be made by the author of nature, or with his permission; and if one real miracle might be permitted for the purpose of deception, any other, or all of them, might.

If the divine Being could either by his own immediate power, or the agency of any superior

superior spirit, enable Jesus to heal the sick; to feed the multitudes, to change water into wine, to still a tempest, to walk on the sea, and to raise the dead; and if, after a public execution (which rendered his death unquestionable) God should raise him from the dead, and take him up into heaven (by belief of which thousands and ten thousands, millions and thousands of millions, were deceived) he might have permitted all the miracles recorded in the books of Moses, and for the same purpose of deception. As, therefore, you justly, and with indignation, reject the latter supposition, you ought also to reject the former. And if the miracles recorded in the New Testament be true, the Christian doctrine is of God. It behoves you, therefore, seriously to inquire whether they be true or not.

Mr. Levi says, p. 71, that "miracles only were not sufficient to establish a firm belief in the divine mission of Moses." But, after considering what he urges on the subject, I cannot find any thing more than miracles to have been necessary. Indeed there

there cannot be any other criterion of divine interposition besides miracles. He says, p. 68, "it was God speaking with Moses face "to face, in the presence of six hundred "thousand men, besides women and children." But what was this besides a miracle? If there had been nothing extraordinary in the transaction, nothing more than what might have happened to any other man, would your ancestors have believed in him?

Let us consider what Moses himself says, in the very passage quoted by Mr. Levi, Exod. xix. 9. *And the Lord said unto Moses, Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud, that the people may bear when I speak with thee, and believe thee for ever;* referring, no doubt, to the delivery of the ten commandments in the hearing of all the people, in a distinct articulate voice, from mount Sinai. This was, indeed, a most extraordinary miracle, and justly confirmed the faith of your ancestors in Moses, so that it has never been shaken since. But it was simply *a miracle* that did it. When Moses, in his first conference

ference with God, at the burning-bush, naturally asked, how he should make it appear to his countrymen that God had sent him, he was directed to the changing of his rod into a serpent before them. Nothing but a miracle, of some kind or other, could have convinced them that he came from God. But any real miracle would have been sufficient for the purpose.

Mr. Levi says, p. 83, that " Moses himself has told us, in the most plain and intelligible language, that miracles only are not a sufficient proof of a divine mission;" and for this purpose he quotes Deut. xiii. 1, 2, 3. *If there arise among you a prophet, a dreamer of dreams, and he give you a sign, or a wonder; and the sign or wonder come to pass whereof he speaketh unto thee, saying, let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; thou shalt not hearken to the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God proveth you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul.*

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This was probably to forewarn your ancestors, that persons might come to them with such tricks as the Egyptian magicians exhibited (the fallacy of which they might not be able to detect) and might endeavour to persuade them to worship other gods; but that they were not to listen to such pretended miracles. They knew that real, numerous, and unquestionable miracles had been wrought in proof of their religion, and therefore that there *could* be no other real miracles to overthrow it. Or, which is no uncommon thing, Moses might put a case that he knew to be impossible, in order to express himself in a stronger manner. Thus Paul says to a christian church, “ if himself, “ or an angel from heaven, should preach “ any other doctrine than that which he had “ taught them, they were not to regard “ him.” Gal. i. 8. But he had no idea of the possibility of any such thing.

But you will please to observe, that what Moses says does not at all apply to the case of Jesus. For he did not endeavour to draw you to the worship of *other gods*. He was
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a humble and devout worshipper of the same God that you worship, and he worshipped him in the same manner. There is, therefore, no reason whatever why you should not attend to the miracles of Jesus, as much as to those of Moses, or those of any of the prophets who followed him.

Mr. Levi objects to the miracles of Jesus, p. 77, as "scarcely just, or rational." But if they were *true*, we should be cautious how we pronounce this censure upon them. In general, it cannot be denied that the miracles of Jesus were both benevolent and great, such as were worthy of a messenger from the greatest and best of Beings. With respect to one or two of them, a person so disposed may cavil, as he might at some that are recorded in the Old Testament. That which Mr. Levi objects to as *unjust* in our Saviour, is the destruction of the swine, after the cure of the two fierce demoniacs. "What "right had he," says Mr. Levi, p. 78, "to "destroy another man's property." I answer, he assumed no right in the case. The miracle was not wrought by him, but by God,

whose right to take our property, our lives, or whatever he has given, no man can question. Jesus laid no hand on the swine, and without a miracle, or the immediate act of God, such a number of swine could never have been made to run into the sea.

When Mr. Levi says the miracles of Jesus were not *rational*, he refers to his cursing the barren fig-tree. "He requires," he says, p. 78, "the tree to produce fruit out of "season." But the *time of figs* does not necessarily mean the time of the *growing, or ripening*, of figs, but rather that of *gathering* them; so that when Jesus saw the tree with leaves, or in a healthy state, he might naturally expect to find fruit also. But this miracle had less respect to the fig-tree, than to serve as a warning to your ancestors, to bring forth the fruits that God expected of them; intimating, in a very expressive manner, that if they did not, they would perish like that tree.

Arguing against the pretensions of Jesus to the gift of *prophecy*, Mr. Levi says, p. 87, "the destruction of Jerusalem was known

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"to all the learned Jews, and therefore Jesus could not be ignorant of it." Consequently, it could not require the spirit of prophecy to fortel all that he did concerning it.

But how does it appear that this great and calamitous event *was* known to all the learned Jews of that age? Nothing is more evident, from the history of it, than that they were far indeed from expecting any such thing in the time of Jesus, or long afterwards. On the contrary, during the very siege, they were continually flattering themselves with the hope of the appearance of the Meffiah, to deliver them. Besides, the prophecy of Daniel is only general, and that of Jesus very particular, describing the circumstances of the siege, and limiting the time of it. He also mentions the fate of the *temple*, concerning which Daniel says nothing at all. The taking of the city did not imply the demolition of the temple. This the conquerors might be expected to preserve with care, as Titus actually endeavoured

voured to do. And least of all could it have been supposed that the Jews themselves would have promoted the destruction of it.

LETTER IV.

Of the supposed Contradictions between Jesus and Moses,

MR. Levi makes use of another argument, which, if it could be supported, would indeed prove that Jesus was a false prophet. "If," says he, p. 25, "we compare Jesus with the rest of the prophets, we shall find such a manifest contradiction between him and them, as to demonstrate that both parties could not be messengers of God, as God never contradicts himself." This he argues on two suppositions, one on that of Christ being God, and the other on his being only a prophet.

"Whether

“ Whether Christ,” p. 21, “ was the second person in the trinity, as Christians in general hold, or only a prophet, as you and the rest of your sect affirm; I say, in either case, he could not be sent to us in the first place, nor could we receive him, without being hostile to the laws of Moses, as also to God who was the author of them, as acknowledged both by Jews and Christians. For if he came in the former character, and the doctrine which he preached was intended to maintain that absurd and corrupt tenet, it would be an unanswerable argument that his doctrine never came from God, it being impossible that God should contradict himself. For has he not expressly told us himself, in the first commandment, **THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME?** This, I think, must necessarily signify, if there be any meaning in language, **ONE SUPREME INTELLIGENT BEING**, endued with all possible perfection, power, wisdom, and goodness. And, agreeable to this just,

C 4 “ rational,

“ rational, and fundamental doctrine, Moses
“ has, in the most solemn manner, endeavoured to inculcate this most important
“ truth, in the following words, *Hear, O Israel, Jehovah our God is one Jehovah.*
“ Deut. vi. 4. These, besides numberless
“ other passages in the Old Testament, make
“ it plain that we could not receive Christ
“ in the first character, without a breach of
“ the covenant established between God
“ and our nation.”

In this all unitarian christians, and your whole nation, are agreed. But Mr. Levi does not pretend to shew that either Jesus himself, or his apostles, taught any such doctrine as that of the *trinity*; and your writers in general prove, against the Christians, that the New Testament contains no such thing. Mr. Levi, therefore, ought not to have left the argument in this state; but have acknowledged, as others of your countrymen have done, that the doctrine of the *trinity* is not any doctrine of the New Testament, but a gross corruption of Christianity. Moses himself is not more explicit
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in teaching the unity of God than are Christ and his apostles, as I have shewn in my former letters; and this Mr. Levi has not controverted.

I shall now consider what Mr. Levi has alleged to prove that Jesus cannot be received as a true prophet of God, on account of his having contradicted what had been advanced by preceding prophets, and especially by Moses, the greatest of them. He quotes for this purpose, Deut. iv. 2. and xii. 3.

"Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, whereas Christians hold that Jesus "had power to abolish the Mosaical dispensation, and which, say they, he actually "did. And although you, and some other "Christians, believe the perpetual obligation of the law of Moses, yet I suppose "that a person of your knowledge need not "be informed, that it is not the sentiment "of Christians in general."

But has Mr. Levi proved from the New Testament, that Christ *did* annul the law of Moses? What some Christians have thought

on

on this subject is no more to the purpose, than their believing the doctrine of the trinity. I have shewn in my former letters, that Christ and the apostles, asserted the perpetual obligation of the law of Moses; and Mr. Levi has not attempted to prove that I have misrepresented their meaning. Nay, your own writers have argued this before me, against the generality of Christians, who had asserted that the law of Moses was abolished by the gospel. You may see my thoughts on this subject at large in the *Theological Repository*, under the signature of HERMAS, Vol. v. p. 403. But this is no part of the argument between you and me, but, like that concerning the doctrine of the trinity, between me and other Christians.

I am satisfied, however, that Mr. Levi has mistaken the sense of Moses in the passage he quotes. It is not there said, or intimated, that God would never, *by any future prophet*, make any change in what he had enjoined by Moses. He only warns them, *that is*, the people in general, who had no particular

particular instruction from God, not to add to the law, or to take from it, that is, without authority from him.

Several additions, you must know, the Divine Being made to your institutions after the time of Moses. He was commanded to construct a tabernacle, but Solomon was directed to build a magnificent temple. Also the temple described by Ezekiel is very different from that of Solomon; and this I imagine you believe to be the pattern of that which is to be erected on your final restoration to your country. In his prophecies there is also a whole set of institutions very different from those of Moses.

It is evident, therefore, that the words of Moses are not to be interpreted as they are by Mr. Levi. God will always reserve to himself the power of changing his institutions, according as the circumstances of his creatures shall require. And if Jesus was a prophet (proved to be so by real miracles) his institutions must have the same authority with those of Moses himself, even though they should be different from his. I shall, however,

however, consider all the instances of contradiction that Mr. Levi finds between what Jesus delivered and what was taught by Moses, that you may see what the amount of them is, and then judge whether they be sufficient to prove that he must be a false prophet.

" Moses," he says, p. 27, " allowed a man to put away his wife, if he found some uncleanness in her, and she was allowed to marry another; whereas Jesus said, " whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery." But Jesus himself observed, that the permission of divorce by Moses was an innovation. Matt. xix. 8. *Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, suffered you to put away your wives; but from the beginning it was not so. Have ye not read, that he who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said (Gen. ii. 24.) for this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh?* What can express a more indissoluble union than this, as it is recorded by Moses himself?

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And yet for the hardness of your hearts, or because the woman who should be disliked would be subject to cruel treatment, divorces were permitted. But could not the same power which gave the permission, revoke it at his pleasure?

I have no occasion to reply on the same principle to any other of Mr. Levi's charges of contradiction, because they arose among yourselves, and were such additions to the institutions of Moses, as are most expressly forbidden in the passage quoted above.

Mr. Levi urges the command of Jeremiah, xvii. 21. *Take heed to yourselves, that ye bear no burden on the sabbath-day;* whereas Jesus commanded some of the sick persons, whom he healed on that day, to take up their beds, and carry them home; probably to shew that they were perfectly, though suddenly, restored to their vigour. But the meaning of Jeremiah was to forbid habitual labour on the sabbath-day, which it appears that the people then made use of; carrying burdens out of their houses, and through the gates of the city,

as

as on other days ; whereas all that Jesus did was to correct a superstitious punctilio in the observance of it. The man who carried his bed to his own house, was not labouring to earn his livelihood. Besides, in that age at least, your own people allowed more labour than Jesus here authorized, as to lead their cattle to water, and relieve them if they fell into pits, &c. though it might require great labour ; and they defended themselves when they were attacked on the sabbath-day. But if what Jesus ordered *had* been a change in the law, surely he who could heal the sick by a word speaking, shewed that he was authorized to do it.

Mr. Levi also charges it as a contradiction to Moses, p. 26, that Jesus did not pronounce sentence of death on the woman taken in adultery. But in bringing this woman to Jesus, your ancestors only meant to ensnare him. If he had passed sentence of death on her (which it was no more *his* business, than it was of those who brought her to him) they would very justly have accused him to the Roman governor, as one who had

had assumed temporal power. Besides, Jesus did not say that the woman *ought* not to have been stoned ; but, acting in his proper character, as a *prophet*, he bid her *go away, and sin no more.*

The last instance that I shall mention is one with respect to which Mr. Levi is still more evidently mistaken. “ He said, John “ v. 39, *The Father himself who hath sent me hath borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time,*” Mr. Levi should have added, *nor seen his shape*, and then he could not have made the remark which follows. “ Pray Sir,” p. 88, “ What “ do you think of this expression, which is “ so contrary to what both Jews and christians believe, viz. that God spake to the “ Jewish nation face to face, as recorded by “ Moses.” But what Jesus said related to the very persons whom he was addressing, none of whom had heard God speak from mount Sinai, and certainly had not seen any *form*, or *shape*, there, as Moses himself repeatedly declared. But, perhaps, Jesus spake interrogatively, *Have ye not heard*

heard his voice, and seen his shape? alluding to the voice from heaven, and the descent of the Holy Spirit like a dove, which some of his auditors might have heard and seen.

Such are the contradictions which Mr. Levi has charged on the founder of the christian religion. Do you now judge whether they will authorize you to pronounce him to be a false prophet.

L E T T E R V.

Of the Sufferings of the Jewish Nation.

AS an argument of your nation having offended God beyond any thing that is recorded in the books of the Old Testament, I requested you to attend to the extreme severity of your present sufferings, and the long continuance of your banishment from your own country; and I said that a captivity of seventy years was deemed a sufficient punishment for all your transgressions preceding that event.

Mr.

Mr. Levi replies, that the Babylonish captivity was not a punishment for *all* the sins of the preceding period. "They were carried away to Babylon," he says, p. 45, "for the sin of not keeping the sabbath of the land, agreeable to what Moses foretold. But for their other sins, viz. *idolatry, murder, and whoredom*, they did not receive any punishment during the Babylonish captivity," p. 49, "by reason of the shortness of its duration, and therefore this longer captivity was necessary to finish *transgression*, that is, *idolatry*, and to make an accomplishment for *sin*, i. e. *whoredom*, and to make an atonement for *iniquity*, i. e. *murder*.

Thus does Mr. Levi interpret Daniel's famous prophecy of *seventy weeks*, of which he gives the following account, p. 40.— "Daniel, judging that the sins of his nation would be done away by the seventy years captivity at Babylon, the angel informs him, that their sin would not be atoned for by the seventy years. But verily, as to Israel, he would not only

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" wait seventy years, but seven times seventy years ; after which their kingdom should be cut off, and their dominion cease, and they return into captivity, to finish an atonement for their transgressions."

But the language of the prophecy clearly indicates that the termination of this longer period of seven times seventy years would be some joyful event, and not a calamitous one. For it was "to finish transgression, to make an end of sin, to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision" (which Mr. Levi renders, p. 55, by publicly authenticating it) "and to anoint the most holy." Could this be the beginning of sorrows ?

If by the *most holy*, we understand the holy prophet, or prince, whom we suppose to be mentioned afterwards, under the character of *Messiah the prince*, these four hundred and ninety years will terminate at the time of his being appointed to his office. This I think we are authorized to infer from the manner in which the angel immediately proceeds to explain himself. *Know therefore*

fore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and build Jerusalem unto Messiah the prince, shall be seven weeks and sixty and two weeks ; that is, sixty-nine weeks. One week still remains to make up the seventy ; but of this the angel gives an account at the close of the prophecy. It was that week in the midst of which the sacrifice and oblation was to cease, which was to be the beginning of farther calamities. But he does not say that these farther calamities would be a punishment inflicted for sins committed before the Babylonish captivity.

Mr. Levi says, p. 43, that the word תְּנִזֵּן, which we render *determined*, means *cut off*. But admitting this, it is far from following that this was to be a cutting off, or a separation, of the *people* from the holy city. For it was the *period of time* that was cut off, and not the *people*. It is therefore far more natural to suppose, that it means *cutting off*, *marking*, or *determining* a period of time, as in our translation.

I would farther observe, that Mr. Levi's account of your present sufferings is neither agreeable to *reason*, nor to the *scriptures*. It is no where said, either before the captivity, or afterwards, that it was intended as a punishment for not observing the *sabbath* in particular, but for *sin* in general. It is only said that, during that captivity, the land would keep its sabbaths, which it had not been allowed to do before. 2 Chron. xxxvi.

21. *To fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths. For as long as she lay desolate, she kept sabbath, to fulfil threescore and ten years.* But this is far from amounting to a proof that this captivity was for no other purpose.

If we consider the conduct of your ancestors after their return from Babylon, we shall perceive no appearance of their supposing that they had been punished there for their neglect of the *sabbath* only, while greater crimes remained to be expiated by heavier judgments at a distant period. The

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confession they make is of sin in general, and not of neglecting the sabbath in particular. Nay, the neglect of the sabbath is not mentioned at all. Neh. ix. 23. *Thou art just in all that thou hast brought upon us. For thou hast done right, and we have done wickedly. Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, or our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments, and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them. For they have not served thee in their kingdom, and in that great goodness which thou gavest them, and in that large and fat land which thou gavest before them; neither turned they from their wicked works.* Here is no mention of the non-observance of the sabbath in particular; which might have been expected, if it had been understood by the people that *that* had been the offence for which *only* they had suffered.

Besides, in how capricious and unworthy a manner does Mr. Levi represent the God of your fathers, the righteous judge of all the earth, as acting; in punishing for one particular sin by a heavy calamity, and

after shewing all the marks of forgiveness and reconciliation, reserving his greatest vengeance for another season, not to commence till six hundred years afterwards. How contrary is this to his own most solemn declaration by Moses (Exod. xx. 5.) that he would visit the sins of the fathers upon the children *to the third and fourth generation* only, of them that hate him.

On the plan of Mr. Levi, even your next restoration to your country will be no proof that God has forgiven your nation *all* the sins they committed before the Babylonish captivity, to say nothing of those committed since. According to him, you may now be suffering for their *idolatry*, while another dispersion may be appointed for their *murders*, and another for their *whoredoms*, in all of which you who suffer had no concern, &c. The very mention of the idea is sufficient to explode it.

Mr. Levi, as if not quite satisfied with this account of your present sufferings, assigns another reason for them, viz. that, besides answering the purpose of *punishment*, they likewise

likewise answer that of *instruction*, not to yourselves, but the rest of the world. "As
"a captivity of four hundred years," he
says, p. 52, "was necessary for the nation
"of the Jews only to arrive at the true
"knowledge of God, it must consequently
"be necessary for this captivity to be much
"longer, as being the means of bringing all
"the nations of the earth to the true faith,
"agreeable to what the prophet Isaiah says,
"And it shall come to pass in the last days,
"that the mountain of the Lord's house shall
"be established on the top of the mountains,
"and be exalted above the hills, and all nations
"shall flow unto it."

On this I must observe, that neither is it any where said that the design of the bondage in Egypt was to teach the Israelites the knowledge of the true God, nor that your present dispersion is designed to instruct the world in that knowledge. Nay, so far was the Egyptian bondage from teaching your ancestors this important knowledge, that, though they were the worshippers of the true God when they went into Egypt, they

were idolaters when they came out of it. It was their *deliverance* from the yoke of the Egyptians, not their *subjection* to it, that was the means of instructing them, and other nations too, as Moses abundantly testifies.

In like manner, it will be your *restoration* to your own country, and not your present *banishment* from it, that will be the means of convincing all the world of the truth of your prophecies, and consequently of the truth of your religion, and of confirming them in the faith and pure worship of the God of your fathers to the end of time. The reflexion on the whole of your remarkable history, of your prosperity and adversity, in connexion with your adherence to the worship of the true God, and your obedience to his prophets, or your neglect of it, and your disobedience, when all the prophecies shall have had their completion, cannot fail to strike and convince all. But the long continuance of your sufferings, unconnected with any future consequences, has no tendency to produce that effect. Nay, the longer you continue in your present state, the

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more is the faith of mankind staggered, and the greater trial it is to your own faith. Many christians, who have the same respect for the books of the Old Testament with yourselves, judging from present appearances, consider you as abandoned of God, and do not believe that you will ever be restored to your country again.

Consider then, I intreat you, your real situation, and how your calamities presently followed the rejection of Christ, and the apostles, by your ancestors (and your nation has persisted in rejecting them to this day) and think whether your receiving them as true prophets of God (who were sent to your nation in the first place) may not be followed by consequences the reverse of those which followed the rejection of them. According to Moses, a restoration to your country will always be the consequence of your repentance of those sins for which you would be expelled from it. Deut. xxx. 1—5. *And it shall come to pass when all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse which I have set before thee, and thou shalt call them*

them to mind, among all the nations whither the Lord thy God hath driven thee, and shalt return to the Lord thy God, and shalt obey his voice, according to all that I command thee this day, thou and thy children, with all thine heart and with all thy soul; that THEN the Lord thy God will return thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations whither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee. Why is not this glorious prophecy fulfilled? But because you have not yet complied with the conditions of it. According to Moses, your return to your country is always in your own power. Do your part, and your merciful God and father will not delay to do his.

LETTER VI.

Of Daniel's Prophecy of Seventy Weeks.

M^R. Levi says, p. 91, that "the fairest method to conviction with respect to the messiahship of Jesus, is to take a review of all the prophecies concerning the

"the Messiah, from Moses to Malachi, and compare them with the acts of Jesus recorded in the New Testament, to see whether or no they have been fulfilled in his person." This, he says, he himself has done. This I have also done, and you may see the result of my inquiries in the *Theological Repository*, under the signature of PAMPHILUS. I did not, in my last letters, trouble you with all the particulars of this long examination; contenting myself with mentioning one of those prophecies, but it is the only one in which the *Messiah* is mentioned by that name in your sacred books; and that which must have led your ancestors to distinguish your future deliverer by that specific appellation. I have shewn that, according to this celebrated prophecy, this Messiah must have made his appearance about the time of Jesus, but certainly long before the present age.

Mr. Levi gives a very different interpretation of this prophecy, in reality the same with that which I quoted from your Rabbi Isaac, but without answering my objections

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to it. He will not allow that the Messiah, which is twice mentioned in this prophecy, refers at all to the person whom you now distinguish by that title; but says that, in the former part of the prophecy, it is to be understood of Cyrus, and in the latter of Agrippa the younger; though, surely, nothing can be more unnatural than to explain it in this manner. Can the same term, in two contiguous sentences of the same prophecy, signify two different persons, one of them a heathen prince, and the other a king of Judea, who lived seven hundred years after him?

Mr. Levi supposes, with R. Isaac and S. Jarchi, though he does not distinctly express it, that the *going forth of the commandment* means the declaration of the divine will to Jeremiah. *Ab eo tempore quo Jeremias illam rem proloquutus fuerat, sive a captivitate Zedechiae usque ad unctum ducem, qui Cyrus est, futuras hebdomadas septem, quae 49 annos complectuntur.* *Munimen Fidei*, p. 338. *Tempus dabitur a die devestationis usque dum veniat Cyrus.* *Jarchi Comment,*

Comment. Vol ii. p. 779. But nothing is advanced by these writers to make it probable that the *going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem* is coincident with the time of the demolition of it by Nebuchadnezzar. The prophecy of Jeremiah was first delivered in the fourth year of Jehoiakim and the first of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. xxv. 12.) and repeated, in a letter to the captives, in the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah. Ch. xxviii. 1. xxix. 10.

That Agrippa could not be the *latter Messiah* (if there must be two of them in this prophecy) I have shewn, by observing that this prince was not killed at the siege of Jerusalem, but probably ended his days peaceably at Rome, long after. Josephus, in the history of his own life, has given us two letters of this Agrippa, written after he had perused his history, and consequently several years after the destruction of Jerusalem. He is also mentioned by Tacitus, as the ally of the Romans in the Jewish war. And though this writer (Hist. Lib. V.) gives a pretty

pretty circumstantial account of the war, he says nothing of the defection, or death, of that prince in the course of it. By Mr. Levi's own confession, there was a Messiah cut off about that time, and who could this be but Jesus?

Agrippa was too inconsiderable a prince to be the subject of such a prophecy; whereas the figure that Jesus makes in your history is so conspicuous, that it might have been expected that he would have been noticed in your prophecies on some account or other. No Jew, no person of any nation, ever occasioned such a revolution in the religious state of the world (and religion is the great object of your whole constitution) as Jesus Christ has effected. By this single Jew, and his followers, have the idolatrous systems of every nation within the bounds of the whole Roman empire, and far beyond it, been already overturned; and according to present appearances, independent of the prophecies of the New Testament, by Christianity, and not by the institutions of Moses as such, will idolatry (to which those

institutions were particularly opposed) be extirpated out of the world.

But where will you find so distinguished a person in history noticed at all in your prophecies, if he be not the Messiah of Daniel, that Messiah who was to be *cut off*, and *not for himself*, and the same person who in Daniel, vii. 13. is styled *the son of man, who will come in the clouds of heaven, and to whom will be given dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, whose dominion will not pass away, and whose kingdom will not be destroyed?*

"The seventy weeks," Mr. Levi says, p. 41, "are, without doubt, four hundred and ninety years, the time from the destruction of the first temple to the destruction of the second." But if there be any truth in history, the interval between those two events was about six hundred and fifty years; and it is by history that prophecy must be interpreted.

I observed that it must have been from this prophecy that your ancestors first learned to distinguish your great deliverer by the name of *Messiah*. But Mr. Levi says, p.

94, “ It is not the *name* of the Messiah,
“ but the *character* of the person foretold
“ by the prophets that is to be regarded;”
and he observes that the Chaldee Paraphrasts
have used that term, in their interpretation
of other prophecies which they apply to
your future deliverer. But what could have
led *them* to apply this term to your great
deliverer, but their supposing that he was
the same person who had been so denom-
inated in this prophecy of Daniel? The
term never occurs in any preceding pro-
phecy, except in Isaiah, in which it is ap-
plied to Cyrus. And this heathen prince
could never have been supposed to be the
person whom you now call *the Messiah*.
Undoubtedly, therefore, they who first used
this term, as denoting your *future deliverer*,
must have thought that he was the same
person who was intended in the prophecy of
Daniel; and it cannot have been any thing
but your disappointment, in his not coming
about the time signified by Daniel, that has
led your writers to seek out some other
interpretation.

It is manifest that your ancestors in general *did* expect the appearance of the Messiah about the time of Jesus Christ; and what could have occasioned their expectation of him so much, *at that particular time*, but a supposition that he was the person intended by Daniel in this prophecy, the accomplishment of which you even now acknowledge falls about that time?

LETTER VII.

THE CONCLUSION.

I CANNOT conclude this second set of letters to you, without once more entreating you to give due attention to the proper, that is the historical, evidence of Christianity. For it is on this, which Mr. Levi has not so much as touched upon, that the controversy between us must hinge. Examine the credibility of the gospel history, as you would that of any other history that

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should fall into your hands. Consider at what time the books which contain it were published, and how they were received. If their authenticity be equal to that of other credible histories, so that you can depend upon the truth of the *leading facts* (which is all that we can say of any history) consider what those leading facts are, who appear to have been the witnesses of them, whether they were persons likely to be deceived themselves, or to attempt to deceive others; and whether, if that might have been their intention, it was in their power to do it.

Let me particularly recommend to your careful perusal the *Letters* I lately addressed to *philosophical unbelievers* in general, and which I requested that you would consider as addressed to yourselves in particular. If from them it should appear that Jesus wrought real miracles, or did such things as a man could not have done if God had not been with him, you can no more disregard his authority than that of Moses. If, after proving his divine mission by a series of unquestionable miracles, Jesus persisted in declaring himself

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to be *the Messiah* of your scriptures, it will be impossible not to allow his claim. And the difficulty, which, from a long confirmed habit of thinking otherwise, you will feel in reconciling to his character and conduct the descriptions of the Messiah in the prophecies, will at length be overcome by more attentive consideration.

Do not reject without examination the hypothesis I mentioned in my former Letters, and which I have maintained at large in the *Theological Repository*, of the distinction between the *Messiah* who was to suffer, and who alone bears that name, and the *prince of the house of David*, under whom you are to enjoy your future glory.

However, if this supposition should not appear to be well founded, it will not follow that Jesus is not the Messiah, the Messiah whom you expect; as it may be even *under him*, in some sense or other, that you shall enjoy your future happiness. But with respect to all these things, you should, with diligence, and without prejudice, study the scriptures, and judge for yourselves; bal-

ancing one difficulty with another, and adopting that scheme which, *on the whole*, shall appear to be attended with the *fewest* difficulties. In the interpretation of prophecies we cannot expect to meet with none.

If after this you be convinced (as I am confident that, if you examine without prejudice, you will be) that Jesus wrought real miracles, and that, after dying he rose from the dead, whatever else he be, he cannot be a person who is not intitled to your regard; and your conduct with respect to him cannot be a matter of indifference in the sight of God. If God, the God of your fathers, really sent him, he will expect that, as his messenger, you pay due attention to him. To reject him, will be to reject him that *sent him*. And if this be the case, can you wonder that he has rejected you? But *return unto him, and he will return unto you.* Mal. iii. 7.

I have made this second address to you, not because I thought Mr. Levi's arguments formidable. Of this I think you must now

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be sensible yourselves ; but rather to show the importance of a defence of your principles, better considered, and better conducted, than his has been ; and it is my earnest wish that the ablest men you have may give their most serious attention to it. To *you* no subject whatever can be half so interesting ; and, be assured, I do not address you as a *disputant*, desirous of triumphing in any advantage I may have in the argument, but from the truest respect to your nation, as most highly distinguished by the great *father of all the families of the earth* (to which, as a Christian, I think myself, and all mankind, under infinite obligations) and from the most earnest wish to promote your welfare, here and hereafter.

I have given much attention to your history, and especially your controversies with Christians in all ages, and I do not wonder that they have issued in confirming your prejudices against Christianity. In all of them the Christians have insisted upon topics with respect to which it was impossible that you should come to an agreement,

especially the divinity of Christ, and the doctrine of the trinity, that “absurd and ‘corrupt tenet,’” as Mr. Levi properly calls it. You justly think yourselves excused from giving the least attention to any arguments that may be alleged in support of it; since it is an attempt to draw you to the worship of *another God* besides that of your fathers.

It must more particularly excite your indignation, to be told that your ancestors themselves held the doctrine of the trinity, and that they expected the second person of it in your Messiah, than which you know that nothing can be more contrary to truth, or probability.

But as your own writers have never failed to reproach Christians with this doctrine, as not taught even in the New Testament, and you find that many Christians reject it with as much indignation as yourselves, you ought to consider this great stumbling block as removed, and therefore that the religion of Christ *may* come from God. Examine then, with impartiality, the evidences of his divine

divine mission, and compare them with those of Moses and your other prophets.

And here the question is not which miracles were the more *splendid*, or which we may imagine to have been more *proper*, and, as Mr. Levi says, more *rational*, but only which are the *best attested*. Of the other we cannot pretend to be competent judges. Every miracle, or real change in the established course of nature, is equally a proof of the interposition of the author of nature, and may serve as an evidence of a divine mission; the changing of a rod into a serpent, as much as the passage of your fathers through the Red Sea, or the wonderful appearances at Mount Sinai. I, therefore, earnestly intreat, that this, and this only (or at least chiefly) may be the subject of our discussion.

To my endeavours by writing, I shall not fail to add my most earnest prayers to your God and my God, that great Being in whose bands are the hearts of all men, and who, by means ordinary or extraordinary, as seems best

best to his infinite wisdom, turns them (Prov. xxi. 1.) as the rivers of water which way soever he pleases, to remove your prejudices, and every obstacle that for the present prevents your reception of a truth in which you are most nearly interested, and according to his faithful promises, restore you to his favour, never to lose it any more.

I once more subscribe myself, with the greatest respect and affection,

Your brother in the sole worship

Of the one only true God,

JOSEPH PRIESTLEY.

7 DECEMBER

BIRMINGHAM,

July 1, 1787.